

REVIEW

Film Review by L. L. (Bud) Henry

Kane'ohe, Hawai'i

Te Pito o te Henua: Rapanui. A 90-minute documentary about Easter Island, directed by Merata Mita *

The advance press release for this film states:

The film (video) titled *Te Pito o te Henua: Rapanui*, was directed by Merata Mita and shot over a period of four years. It focuses on the history and aspirations of the Rapanui people, allowing them to tell their story and the story of their island, in their own words. The way they have been portrayed so far in the media has not done them justice. There is plenty of negative emphasis on the damage to the environment, but little has been said about the positive aspects of Rapanui's people and their community. And nothing has been said about the impact of scientific misinformation and speculation, the theft of cultural treasures, and the desecration of burial tombs. The emphasis of the West, scientists, tourists and academics, has been on their own creation of a 'mystery' and the concept of an island with a 'past,' but without a present or a future. This film shows us that nothing could be further from the truth. Their isolation, and tragic history, has not dulled the sensibilities of the Rapanui people. If anything, it has made them acutely aware of the value of their land, language and culture, and the struggle they are going through, to retain them. These are some of the serious concerns raised by various people from the Rapanui community in the film. As well, they share their island lifestyle with us, their songs, dances, arts and crafts, the festivities of the annual Tapati festival, and leave us with their visions for the future. The elemental beauty of the land and its people are something to be remembered.

CRITIQUE AND OBSERVATIONS

Everything in the past is history. In general, the video belittles anthropologists and archaeologists for climbing all over the island and prying into the lives of the Rapanui people for the past hundred years or so. Ironically, the director bases her video on their search, research and information. She also criticizes previous, non-Rapanui filmmakers for coming to the island with their own agendas and producing films that tell the story of Rapa Nui through their own eyes. Yet, like those she knocks, this is what she does. It appears that she has been influenced by the present sovereignty movement in Hawai'i as well as conflicts in New Zealand.

The film opens with a summary of the prehistory of the island but quickly moves to what seems to be the prime subject—life on Rapa Nui today. The focus is largely on a particular family chosen to exemplify the Rapanui and because of its apparent Māori ties. However, within the spectrum of the Rapanui community, this is an elite family, educated in western universities and living a colonial Chilean lifestyle. Mita did not know that they are the descendents of the island's last sheep ranch manager who allegedly exploited the Rapanui people.

Land and sovereignty issues came to a head during one of Mita's brief stays. The film includes some scenes of dissension by a few people against the current government. Protesters in prison are always a good show, but people being released from prison is even better. The real issues, however, were hard to pin-

point. There was too much footage and disconnected dialog in English, Spanish, Rapanui, plus subtitles for viewers to follow meaningfully. Was the issue a question of land rights? Was it over current admission fees being charged by the Chilean National Parks department? If showing factions of people in conflict as a measure of a culture, this does not put the Rapanui in a good light. The Rapanui Council of Elders have been diligently working on their land and sovereignty problems for decades. Nothing is mentioned of the fact that 240 families are presently being resettled on National Park land as a result of peaceful resolution of these issues.

The predominant religion on Rapa Nui is Catholicism and life in Hanga Roa centers upon it. Scenes outside the church on a typical Sunday are shown, as well as the local traditional carvings that adorn the inside of the church. This was oddly juxtaposed with footage of a religious procession showing a crowd carrying crucifixes and religious icons as well as scenes of heavily armed troops marching through city streets. This could be construed as quelling a disturbance in Hanga Roa, but to those who know, this poorly selected footage was probably shot in Santiago, Chile, during some conflict: streets are shown, lined with tall well-lit buildings in the background. The tallest structures on Rapa Nui are the church steeple and the radio and airport control towers.

The most entertaining aspect of the film included scenes of the annual Tapati Rapa Nui Cultural Festival. Traditional body painting, carvings, crafts, a parade, as well as some great scenes from a banana-stump sledding contest added a much needed break to the frustratingly brief and scattered glimpses at Rapa Nui life.

The Rapanui have had a sad history. History says, and the video affirms, that the Rapanui had dwindled to a little more than a hundred survivors around 1870. That is when they began to lose their self-identity and cultural pride. The Rapanui memory-bank perished during the Peruvian slave debacle due to "white man" diseases, only leaving some old men and women, the infirm or very young as survivors.

After the slave trade devastated the population, the island was leased to a British sheep company by Chile who had taken possession of the island in 1888. Upwards of 70,000 head of sheep grazed freely on most of the island and the Rapanui were forbidden to go beyond the boundaries of Hanga Roa village. This was to deter them from stealing sheep; however, the islanders became the penned animals. It was not until 1953 that the sheep era ended and the Rapanui were free to again roam their island. That was perhaps the most severe and long-standing period of oppression of any Pacific Island people.

To solve the so-called "mysteries" of Easter Island, careful study of archaeological evidence is required. It is unfortunate that the film had no input by academically trained Rapanui researchers who have also been searching for the "mysteries" of their island home. Former Governor Sergio Rapu is a Rapanui archaeologist who restored Ahu Nau Nau at 'Anakena in 1978. He, along with archaeologist, Sonia Haoa, found the coral eye pieces that "opened" the *moai's* eyes to the rest of the world -- an achievement for the Rapanui and the world to behold! Sergio was initially trained by Dr. William Mulloy and holds his degree in anthropology from the University of Wyoming.

No mention was made in Mita's film of Katherine Routledge's epic Mana expedition or of ethnologist Alfred Métraux's studies on the island in the 1930's, nor the extensive archaeological work by the Norwegian Archaeological Expedition led by Thor Heyerdahl in the 1950's, nor is there mention of Father Sebastian Englert, who documented much of the history, culture and language of the Rapanui during his thirty-four years on the island.

Out of the fine work of these scholars grew the dedicated efforts of many more scholars that followed. The work being conducted on Rapa Nui today owes much to their pioneering investigations. Archaeology has enhanced Rapa Nui cultural pride, serving to support a new generation in a renaissance of interest in their Polynesian cultural past.

Only two scientists were singled out by name in the film, but nothing was said of their accomplishments: Thor Heyerdahl and William Mulloy. Heyerdahl's expedition erected the first *moai*, Ahu Ature Huke, at Anakena in 1955. Mulloy, who was a member of Heyerdahl's 1955 expedition team, became the leading expert on the archaeology of Easter Island until his death in 1978. Through scientific methods and hard physical work, Mulloy and Gonzalo Figueroa, a Chilean anthropologist, along with a dedicated Rapanui crew, reconstructed Ahu Akivi, in the manner of their ancestors (without cranes) in 1960. In 1969, the Tahai archaeological complex near Hanga Roa was restored by Mulloy and his Rapanui assistants. At that time, the Rapanui were just beginning to recover from the sheep land-lease era; a time when they were made to feel that they had no reason to be proud. Tahai's restoration was another landmark in reestablishing the pride of the people. Scenes shot at Tahai, besides being picturesque, are always used as a symbol of the strength and pride of the Rapa Nui people (including by Mita). If Mita went to Mulloy's monument at Tahai—constructed in his honor by the Rapanui people—she would have read the following epithet: "By restoring the past of his beloved island, he also changed its future."

The bottom line of Mita's video appears to be that the work of well-meaning scientists who tried to reconstruct Rapa Nui history and culture needs to be discounted and false information should be corrected to take the mystery out of things Rapanui. Never mind that the Rapanui had lost much of their history and cultural pride before the arrival of inquisitive scientists.

The purpose of the film and its target audience is not clear. If Mita had attended the Albuquerque Easter Island South Seas Symposium in 1997 (within the time she was making the film), she would have realized that Rapa Nui is a fixed star of the Polynesian Community and there is no need for an apology video. She makes abundant use of the past history of the Rapanui as revealed by the scientists whom she damns.

In this effort Mita offers a look at Rapa Nui through Māori eyes, drawing heavily on the concept of Polynesian camaraderie and their struggles for identity. Unfortunately, she fails to see many of the distinctions that make the Rapa Nui people special and the place unique. Easter Island is the southeastern anchor of the Polynesian Triangle, 4,500 miles east of New Zealand. Polynesian migration to Rapa Nui occurred four hundred years before Polynesians arrived in Aotearoa, and their culture developed quite differently in prehistoric and historic times.

As Mita was completing her film, interest was mounting about the sailing of the Polynesian voyaging canoe, *Hōkūle'a*, to Rapa Nui. On a four-day visit in 1998, a Hawai'i Department of Education film team shot a much more comprehensive informational and educational film about Rapa Nui's history, island life and culture. Ironically, it was also called *Te Pito o te Henua*.

* *Merata Mita is a New Zealand filmmaker who sees New Zealand and the world at large as a very troubled place, specifically in terms of racial, cultural, and ideological problems. "Unless we become increasingly vocal and aggressive no-one pays any heed," Mita says. Henry states that although she may be a stirrer in New Zealand, she does not know what she is doing when she attempts to stir up other places, such as Rapa Nui.*

Book Review

TATTOOS FROM PARADISE. TRADITIONAL POLYNESIAN PATTERNS. By Mark Blackburn. 1999. Schiffer Publishing, Atglen, PA. ISBN: 0-7643-0941-2. 205 pages. Hardcover, glossy, oversize.

Review by Georgia Lee

This extraordinary book is composed of early art and photographs from the 19th century that illustrate the various types of tattoo in Polynesia, as well as artifacts that relate to the art of tattooing. The more than 250 illustrations in color or sepia tone are wonderful, if a tad scary in some cases (a row of New Zealand trophy heads with chisel *moko* comes to mind!). The book is divided into chapters for each island or island group: New Zealand, Hawai'i, Tahiti, Marquesas, Easter Island, Samoa, and Tonga. Each chapter has an introduction discussing the particular island, when it was first impacted from the outside, a bit of history regarding the society, and then into the tattooing in that particular part of the Pacific. Each image is described, and even a bit of biography concerning the photographer or artist is included. There is an Appendix listing the principle voyages of exploration, a Bibliography and Index.

Blackburn is to be commended for putting this remarkable collection of images together. For those interested in tattoo and/or Polynesia, it is a 'must have' book.

EASTER ISLAND GIANT STONE STATUES TELL OF A RICH AND TRAGIC PAST. By Caroline Arnold 1999. Clarion Books, New York. ISBN 0-395-87609-5. \$15.00.

Review by Tom Christopher

This new children's book is well written and accurately targeted for the age group 9-12. Heyerdahl is mentioned but his theory of how people arrived on Easter Island is dismissed. He is credited with stimulating "much popular interest in Easter Island." Altogether a pretty good effort, with all the photographs printed right side up, unlike Miriam Meyer's *Blind Guards of Easter Island* another children's book about Easter Island.